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# So You Want to Do Post-Intentional Phenomenological Research?


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## So You Want to Do Post-Intentional Phenomenological Research?

### **Abstract**

In this article, phenomenology, both in its philosophical and methodological variants, is introduced in the form of a fictional dialogue between a student justifying her interest in using a post-intentional phenomenological approach in her dissertation to her major professor. The dialogue tackles founding philosophers, notably Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty; contemporary researchers, including A. Giorgi, B. Giorgi, van Manen, and Vagle; several phenomenological concepts, such as intentionality, bracketing, and bridling; and provides examples of three distinct approaches to phenomenological research.

### **Keywords**

Phenomenology, Post-Intentional Phenomenology, Bridling, Bracketing, Intentionality

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## So You Want to Do Post-Intentional Phenomenological Research?

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*In this article, phenomenology, both in its philosophical and methodological variants, is introduced in the form of a fictional dialogue between a student justifying her interest in using a post-intentional phenomenological approach in her dissertation to her major professor. The dialogue tackles founding philosophers, notably Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty; contemporary researchers, including A. Giorgi, B. Giorgi, van Manen, and Vagle; several phenomenological concepts, such as intentionality, bracketing, and bridling; and provides examples of three distinct approaches to phenomenological research. Keywords: Phenomenology, Post-Intentional Phenomenology, Bridling, Bracketing, Intentionality*

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As a doctoral student, I, Katherine, decided to use a post-intentional phenomenological approach in my dissertation research. I understood that taking a post-intentional approach would alter the fundamental nature of phenomenology from its focus on the essential structure of the lived experience of a particular phenomenon, such as the experience of sudden fright, to one where the tentative, complex, and often contradictory presentation of a phenomenon like fright would be delineated instead. Even while I made this decision, I sensed that my knowledge of phenomenology was too limited to develop an effective research proposal, so I set out one summer to immerse myself in the literature on phenomenology. I constructed a reading list of numerous books and articles and began reading. Holed up in a bagel shop without the Internet, I read these texts in chronological order, and found myself surrounded by an influential, foundational philosophy I never knew existed.

Coming back to the world of academia, I struggled to find ways to share my insights, to explain my deep seeded commitment to the philosophy of phenomenology as well as the method. I realized I had not come across many peer-reviewed articles that helped navigate the intersections of phenomenology as a philosophy and phenomenology as a research methodology. While I was fortunate to have members on my dissertation committee who were familiar with phenomenology, many of my peers did not, and struggled to provide justification for their approaches. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to introduce readers to three distinct phenomenological approaches. Although we discuss the phenomenological concept of intentionality in more depth in the paper, it provides a useful way to quickly introduce the three approaches. Briefly, intentionality means that when we think, experience, or direct our gaze towards an object, *something* appears to us, is there, or has affected us, whether we are conscious of it or not. For phenomenologists, this connectedness between ourselves and the world in its appearing is what phenomenologists study. What distinguishes one approach from another is how intentionality is conceptualized. Table 1 describes these distinctions.

Phenomenological Approach	Descriptive	Interpretive	Post-Intentional
Foundational Theorist	Edmund Husserl	Martin Heidegger	Mark Vagle
Intentionality Conceptualized	How the essential structures of phenomena are revealed in consciousness	How the modes of being of phenomena are constituted within particular meaning-contexts	How phenomena are always appearing and disappearing, and thus partial, multiple, and always in the process of becoming

Table 1: Three Phenomenological Approaches

### So You Want to Use Post-Intentional Phenomenology for Your Dissertation Research?

Melissa: Tell me about your research interests and why you think post-intentional phenomenology is the right approach for what you want to be able to say about your topic?

Katherine: I am interested in exploring mothers' parenting experiences. More specifically, the phenomenon of attachment parenting, which is a parenting philosophy that often keeps mothers and babies in nearly constant physical contact 24 hours a day. The post-intentional phenomenological approach enables researchers to consider how mothers' lived experiences of attachment parenting are constructed in various socio-cultural contexts. In drawing out distinctions between the natural world and the life-world, post-intentional phenomenology enables me to discuss the constructions of motherhood as lived, as well as veiled power dynamics impacting this particular approach to parenting. To be successful, this research approach requires an open and contemplative investigation into the meanings of mothers' lived experiences, probing into what seems obvious and taken for granted. I believe that this position lessens my influence, as the researcher, by moving away from an authoritative voice to one where the "tentative manifestations" (Vagle, 2014) of participants' lived experiences are presented as contextual, partial, and incomplete. This approach supports my interest in the complex issues of motherhood because post-intentional phenomenology requires researchers to examine the lived experiences of attachment parenting as malleable and contextually situated.

Melissa: Okay, so you say you are interested in the experience of mothers who practice attachment parenting and that phenomenology can help you access this phenomenon. What are phenomena, then, as understood by phenomenologists?

Katherine: There are many phenomenological strands so there are different conceptions of what a phenomenon is. So to answer that question, I will need to take a historical detour, back to the beginning of the twentieth century, and begin with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) who launched phenomenology in Germany "as a new way of doing philosophy" (Moran, 2000, p. 1). Not originally a philosopher, Husserl turned to philosophy after having studied extensively in psychology, mathematics, astronomy, and the natural sciences because of philosophy's focus on reason, thinking, and knowledge (Moran, 2000). Husserl was critical of positivism—the dominant epistemological perspective of the time—and how it reduced the world to that which could be measured. Furthermore, he was dissatisfied with the implications of the Cartesian split, or the assertion that consciousness is separate from material substances, such as the body or other objects in the world. Husserl transcended this thinking, arguing that

human consciousness is not separate from the world at all, but constituted the world while also being simultaneously constituted from experience with the world; knowledge comes into being in this relationship (Moran, 2000). With phenomenology, Husserl proposed a radical, philosophical approach to understanding human experience; one that he believed neither prioritized the subjective human or the objective world, instead prioritizing the interconnectedness between the two. It is in this interconnectedness that phenomena appear.

Phenomena are, as Mark Vagle (2014) explains, “the ways in which we find ourselves being in relation to the world through our day-to-day living” (p. 20). Or, another way of putting it, is that a phenomenon is “a thing ... as it presents itself to, or as it is experienced by, a subject” (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nyström, 2008, p. 33). Essentially what these statements are seeking to describe is the experience of experiencing. The overall content of an experience is not essential to the definition of a phenomenon; the experience *of* could relate to a material good, a relationship, a memory, prejudice, language, and the like. Significantly, it is not the experience itself that is being studied; rather, it is the human consciousness *of* the experience. So, phenomenology is the study of these manifestations as they *are* in themselves (Moran, 2000; Vagle, 2014).

Melissa: What do you mean by “in themselves”?

Katherine: This is where things get a bit complicated. Husserl called “human consciousness *of*”—*intentionality*. Unfortunately, intentionality has the general meaning of denoting a purposeful action which is not what Husserl, or other phenomenologists, meant by the term. For phenomenologists, “intentionality” refers to the fact that whenever we are in a state of consciousness—that is, thinking, perceiving, or daydreaming—our consciousness is always *of* some phenomenon. Husserl adapted this concept, conceived of by philosopher Franz Brentano, to reconnect what Descartes had separated when he conceptualized the Cartesian Split as a subject distinct from an object (Vagle, 2014). Husserl argued, instead, that subjects and objects were intrinsically linked or co-constituted, and that this co-constitution occurred *in* the intentional relation of thought itself, that is, as *phenomena*. When we think of a tree, for example, while we and the tree may exist as distinct objects in the world, what appears to us in consciousness is neither the tree nor ourselves, but the manifestation of a phenomenon *in itself*, often conceptualized, as in this example, as the meaning trees or “treeness” has for us. Therefore, the words “subject” and “object” and the idea of intentionality being a “relation” is problematic since the “of” that one is relating to does not necessarily exist (McIntyre & Smith, 1989). What is being revealed *in* consciousness *is* something *itself*, distinct from either the object or subject. That is why phenomena are said to be things that appear *in* consciousness.

Melissa: So phenomenologists study phenomena as they appear in intentional relations. Can you give me an example?

Katherine: Sure. While personal to myself, the format for this example pulls from Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), a French philosopher who was instrumental in bringing phenomenology to the United States. Tonight, my mother-in-law is flying into Atlanta from California to stay with us for ten days. While this information is factually based, “I am able to discover inside this experience, as I live it through, something which is independent of the factual conditions” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 54)—that is, the actual events as they occurred. My relationship with my mother-in-law is not encompassed in these ten days. It has developed over several years and will continue into the future. Our relationship is influenced by the interactions themselves, our own beliefs and interpretations about interactions with in-laws, as well as corresponding cultural norms. The relationship cannot be reduced to a single visit or moment (although these visits and moments are also imbued with meaning). If I could pull together various facets of these visits, “I come to something which is neither singular nor contingent—namely ... [our relationship] in its essence” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 54). This examination of my consciousness *of* my relationship with my mother-in-law is an example of

intentionality. Since phenomenological philosophers are interested in human experience, intentionality allows for an examination of “the object *as* it is apprehended” as opposed to “the object *which* is apprehended” (Macann, 1993, p. 11). This apprehension is complicated by an object’s *manifolds*, the differing apprehensions of (or intentional relationships with) an object that people may have, such as the different facets of my relationship with my mother-in-law. Husserl (1936/1970) explained that no one really experiences an object as it is “since it is always in motion, always, and for everyone, a unity for consciousness of the openly endless multiplicity of changing experiences and experienced things, one’s own and those of others” (p. 164).

Melissa: Thanks, that was helpful. What is interesting is that when you were discussing the philosophy I had this feeling that what you would study phenomenologically would be quite complex but your example suggests that phenomenologists are interested in every day, taken-for-granted experiences. What do phenomenologists study?

Katherine: Anything can be a phenomenon. Researchers have studied their own breathing (Edwards, 2006), the experience of a police chase (Broomé, 2013), healthy adolescents’ experiences of stress-coping (Guimond-Plourde, 2009), just to name a few, so you can see the range of phenomena is endless. However, while many contemporary phenomenologists do not ground their work in the foundational phenomenological philosophies but draw on more contemporary theorists such as Max van Manen, Amedeo Giorgi, Karin Dahlberg, or Mark Vagle, just to name a few, there are important distinctions between studies adopting a Husserlian perspective as opposed to one influenced by Heidegger. So it is helpful to understand the distinct influence these two philosophers have had on the development of phenomenology.

Melissa: Help me understand how these two orientations would change the study’s approach?

Katherine: Part of the distinction has to do with how each of the different phenomenological philosophers theorized intentionality. Because their conceptualizations of intentionality are quite different, it changes the phenomenon, or what it is you think you are studying. For Husserl the phenomenon appears to us as a mental state which is “*intrinsically intentional*, then, because it itself includes ... an intrinsically ‘meaningful,’ or ‘meaning-giving,’ component” (McIntyre & Smith, 1989, p. 162). For example, while we have many experiences of our love for our children, this love manifests itself in many different ways, in different contexts, and through different conscious acts. Husserl believed that the essence of the phenomenon would be revealed by undergoing a “phenomenological reduction” (Husserl, 1913/1962, p. 103). Husserl used many images to explain this process. One that theorists like to share is the idea of peeling an onion. Imagine that the core of the onion is the thing in-itself and each layer is some cultural, social, or theoretical facet of “onion” that distorts what the onion is in-itself. By peeling away preconceived and learned meanings of the object, one might reach the fundamental meaning (or the essence) of the phenomenon, or that which does not change as the layers are peeled away.

In contrast, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who was both Husserl’s student and a critic of Husserl’s work, came to phenomenology through his classical training in philosophy. Heidegger felt that Husserl lacked ontological focus by failing to examine deeply enough the question of *being*, that is, the *being of human being*. While phenomenology is inherently ontological in orientation in that its focus is on the nature and being of phenomenal objects, Heidegger was critical of ontological approaches such as Husserl’s that treated all objects “as ‘things,’ as what is simply there” (Moran, 2000, p. 196). This kind of approach ignores the historical and cultural assumptions shaping everyday existing. Philosophy, therefore, requires

an enquiry into the manner in which the structures of Being are revealed through the structures of human existence, an enquiry, furthermore, which could only be carried out through *phenomenology*, now transformed into *hermeneutical phenomenology*, since the phenomena of existence always require interpretation, and hermeneutics is the art of interpretation. (Moran, 2000, p. 197)

In his most important work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger abandoned Husserl's focus on consciousness, focusing instead on the nature of human existence, reconceptualizing philosophy as "a way of life" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 214).

Heidegger (1927/1998) asserted that the work of phenomenology is "to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself" (p. 30). This assertion holds something of a double meaning. Phenomena are self-showing, they reveal themselves. Yet it is not enough to simply describe these phenomena as they appear, for there is also meaning in what is concealed behind that appearance. For example, a fever can be a symptom of underlying illness or infection, which is not itself visible. In order "to let what show itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself," one must also bring to awareness what is concealed by a phenomenon's appearance. Heidegger believed that a human engages with the world interpretatively, having "the inclination to be entangled in the world in which it is and to interpret itself in terms of that world by its reflected light" (1927/1998, p. 18). In this way, Heidegger moves intentionality out of the structures of the mind and into "the intentional structure of *Dasein* ... [as] being-in-the-world" (Klaskow, 2011, p. 98). For Heidegger the world is the meaning context and so the intentional relationship, which he calls "comportment," is this human-world relation (Klaskow, 2011). Humans do not make sense *of* the world; as beings-*in-the-world* they engage actively in its interpretation.

Vital to this discussion of intentionality, however, regardless of the approach taken—Husserlian or Heideggerian—is the recognition that phenomena have a reality and truth that extends beyond our perceptions of them. In phenomenology (unlike in positivism), the world and/or phenomena cannot be reduced to our perceptions of them (Heidegger, 1927/1998; Husserl, 1936/1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1964). As we could never examine (or even encounter) each and every manifold of a phenomenon's identity, some understanding will always be lacking.

Melissa: Can you explain what you mean by lacking?

Katherine: I'll try. Encountering understandings that are paradoxical is believed to be an inherent part of the phenomenological process. Paradox is first introduced as the philosopher begins a phenomenological inquiry with investigating obvious and taken for granted phenomena. Husserl (1936/1970) explained that:

From the beginning the phenomenologist lives in the paradox of having to look upon the obvious as questionable, as enigmatic, and of henceforth being unable to have any other scientific theme than that of transforming the universal obviousness of the being of the world ... into something intelligible. (p. 180)

After this first confrontation, one will continue to encounter paradox in the investigation. Husserl explained that as philosophers continue to "go back" (p. 177) and "through ever renewed self-reflections ... [they] become involved again and again in paradoxes, which arising out of uninvestigated and even unnoticed horizons, remain functional and announce themselves as incomprehensibilities" (p. 181). For example, in my dissertation study, mothers could simultaneously assert that staying home with their children has been the most meaningful experience of their lives while also in the same interview make statements about their kids

driving them crazy or expressing boredom with their daily routines (Soule, 2013). Through a phenomenological examination, one is likely to face the contradictions and ambiguities that must always exist as we consider different points-of-view and multiple, often contradictory, experiences, particularly when we look beyond our own consciousness *of*.

Moving into even more abstract thinking, Sokolowski (2000) explained that “the way things appear is part of the being of things; things appear as they are, and they are as they appear. Things do not just exist; they also manifest themselves as what they are” (p. 14). In other words, our perception of a phenomenon becomes a part of that phenomenon and the identity of a phenomenon continues to develop through intentionality. A phenomenon is its manifolds of identity. My conceptualization of an object, positive or negative, true or false, becomes a part of that object’s identity. If I perceive a mother to be practicing attachment parenting, then my perception of her parenting style becomes a part of my phenomenological understanding of her. Husserl (1913/1962) required that what we perceive “*is simply to be accepted as it gives itself out to be, though only within the limits in which it then presents itself*” (p. 83). So, this mother’s parenting style, as a manifold of her identity, reveals one dimension of my perception of her. Simultaneously, my overall experience of this individual becomes integrated into the *intrinsic* intentional structure of attachment parenting as a phenomenon.

Heidegger also believed that our phenomenological findings remain partial and exploratory. He suggested that even as one conducts a phenomenological inquiry, understanding “gets enshrined in a methodological principle which might be expressed as the necessarily complementary character of revealing and concealing, covering over and uncovering, closing off and dis-closing” (Heidegger, 1927/1998, pp. 67-68). Heidegger suggested that such partial understandings are a quality of the human inquirer, writing that “what remains concealed ... or what falls back and is covered up again, or shows itself only in a distorted way, is not this or that [phenomenon] but rather ... the being of beings” (p. 31).

It is important to point out that in acknowledging the paradoxes and partiality revealed in an inquiry these philosophers are not faulting phenomenology but acknowledging a quality of human consciousness. In fact, they critique social scientists who adopt an objectivist scientific approach for denying the role of human awareness in their own fields. For example, Husserl (1936/1970) wrote:

If we cease being immersed in our scientific thinking, we become aware that we scientists are, after all, human beings and as such are among the components of the life-world which always exists for us, ever pregiven; and thus all of science is pulled, along with us, into the—merely “subjective-relative”—life-world.... In our attempts to attain clarity we shall suddenly become aware, in the face of emerging paradoxes, that all of our philosophizing [i.e. scientific theorizing] up to now has been without a ground. (pp. 130-132)

Melissa: I can begin to see the different ways that a phenomenon has been conceptualized in phenomenology. I understand that these two philosophies have influenced two distinct ways of conducting phenomenological research, often referred to as descriptive versus interpretive phenomenological research.

Katherine: Husserl and Heidegger’s debates and differences spawned many interpretations of their theories and the development of other phenomenological philosophies, such as, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, to name a few. This division stems from phenomenology’s philosophical roots. The founding philosopher, Husserl (1936/1970) conceived of phenomenology as a descriptive science



focused on the constitution of phenomena in consciousness<sup>1</sup>. As Quentin Lauer (1958) explains: “If one has described phenomena, one has described all that can be described, but in the very constant elements of that description is revealed the *essence* of what is described” (pp. 3-4). On the other hand, Heidegger, believing that the phenomenon manifests in engagement, would not seek the essential structures of a phenomenon in consciousness. Rather, since the meaning of the phenomenon is entangled in our everyday existence, revealing its meaning requires engagement with the interpretative engagement itself. As a result, Husserl’s conceptualization of phenomenology led to the descriptive (i.e., transcendental) phenomenological and human science research approaches; while, Heidegger’s developments would lead to interpretive (i.e., hermeneutic) approaches. The divide between interpretive and descriptive have spawned all sorts of contemporary theorists, some who lean more towards the descriptive side, with others engaging the interpretive side.

Melissa: Can you describe these?

Katherine: Yes, and I will also give you an example of each. Descriptive phenomenological inquiry, as discussed by psychologists and phenomenologists Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) sets out to describe phenomenon. In seeking to describe a phenomenon, the researcher focuses on what is present in the data and ultimately provides a rich, intrinsic account of the findings. Dahlberg et al. (2008) iterated that “the researcher’s description is not naïve, as is the informant’s.... [The] researcher is careful not to make definite what is indefinite” (p. 241). In this method, data come from varied sources including narratives, interviews, fieldwork, and observation. The results of this phenomenological research are aimed “at describing a phenomenon and its meanings without interpretation, explanation, or construction” (p. 241). In order to describe a phenomenon and its meanings, a researcher must take nothing for granted; this is done by questioning and pondering even what seems obvious. Although descriptive phenomenologists like Giorgi draw on Husserl’s philosophy, they caution not to confuse their approach with the philosophy. Giorgi (2000) states clearly that what he has proposed as a methodology is “scientific phenomenology” (p. 12) to emphasize its rigorous, applied nature, not philosophy, and therefore should not be assessed as such. Like Husserl, the researcher is interested in the essence of a phenomenon. Essences are arrived at through phenomenological analysis of the descriptions provided by subjects of experienced situations. From a phenomenological perspective, an essence is the meaning-structure that reveals the “essential characteristics of the phenomenon without which it would not be that phenomenon” (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 11). The search for essences transcends the contextual complexity of an individual’s experience of a phenomenon, to reveal those descriptors most essential to it being *of* that phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2006; Giorgi, 2000). Throughout the research process, one restrains oneself from interpreting the data, deliberately suspending one’s interpretations, in order to be honest to the data. In analysis, the researcher describes the phenomenon, emphasizing its most meaningful parts, and supported by illustrative segments of data (in all of their nuances). The descriptive nature of this research approach is seen in its constant emphasis on describing the phenomenon.

One example of this kind of approach is Barbro Giorgi<sup>2</sup> (2011) who examined clients’ experiences of “pivotal moments” in therapy. As a psychologist and a researcher, she understood a pivotal moment “as a moment experienced by a client that dramatically changed something for the better for him or her, a change that was experienced as overcoming some kind of problem, an experience of some form of important improvement or progress from his

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<sup>1</sup> For Husserl, phenomenology offered a corrective to the accepted view that scientific inquiry resulted in the appropriation of “true” or unmediated accounts of reality (see Applebaum, 2012, for an overview of the relationship between Husserl’s perspective on science and descriptive phenomenology).

<sup>2</sup> Barbro Giorgi is the late wife of Amedeo Giorgi. Both have made significant contributions to the branch of descriptive phenomenology.

or her perspective” (p. 66). Three participants, who each identified as having experienced a pivotal moment, were interviewed. During the interviews, the participants were asked to recall these pivotal moments by describing the overall context of the moment, what led up to the moment, what happened in the moment, and how the participant understood this moment to have brought about dramatic change (Giorgi, 2011).

In data analysis, the researcher reported maintaining the phenomenological attitude through bracketing, reading through the data set in its entirety, rereading the data set with the research focus in mind, clarifying and explicating participants’ pivotal moments, describing the essence of pivotal moments in therapy, and determining the structures/constituents of the pivotal moment. Since the work of bracketing is often misunderstood, it is worth stating that B. Giorgi did not code her data; rather, she bracketed, identifying meaning units that were then combined to represent “constituents,” or the essence of the phenomenon. For example, constituents, such as “trust & safety,” “emotional involvement,” and others were considered while retaining their “empirical variations” (p. 73). By working these manifolds of identity, the essence of the experience of pivotal moments in therapy is slowly brought forward. Eventually, the essential structure of the phenomenon is described. As a result of this analysis, B. Giorgi reported that “the pivotal moment is experienced as a figural moment within the therapeutic process where a serious challenge to old assumptions takes place, necessitating a break from old cognitive, affective and behavioral patterns in a context of trust and safety within the therapeutic relationship” (p. 61). In this way, her research allowed B. Giorgi to move from a description of what a pivotal moment in therapy *is* to be able to describe the *experience of* the pivotal moment.

Melissa: You mentioned bracketing. Can you explain that concept to me?

Katherine: Bracketing is often used, albeit differently, in interpretive phenomenological research so why don’t I describe that first and then explain bracketing.

Melissa: Okay.

Katherine: In contrast to descriptive phenomenological research, the interpretive approach stems from the belief that researchers conduct research because they have a pre-existing interest in human sciences, which is inherently interpretive. van Manen (1990) felt that “to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings” (p. 5). This research can utilize various sources of data including interviews, narrative, and text. In all cases, the researcher must remain vigilant and remember that clarifying and explicating the phenomenon is the point of the research. van Manen (1990) stressed that phenomenological research is

extraordinarily demanding of its practitioners ... there will be many temptations to get side-tracked or to wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculations, to settle for preconceived opinions and conceptions, to become enchanted with narcissistic reflections or self-indulgent preoccupations, or to fall back onto taxonomic concepts or abstracting theories. (p. 33)

In this approach great emphasis is placed on the language used to interpret the phenomenon. “As researchers, we must have good enough knowledge of language in the way that we must have words for, and be sensitive enough to nuances, to describe the full spectrum of meaning, and that essential structure of meaning that hopefully emerges within our research” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 17). In other words, the language one uses to describe the findings may elucidate the phenomenon or serve only to further obscure it. van Manen (1990) believed that “re-thinking, re-reflecting, re-cognizing” (p. 131) is required to interpret the results of a phenomenological human science study, which should be richly narrated and “oriented to the world in a pedagogic way” (p. 151). Ultimately, through the text, the researcher should

“attempt to disclose the deep meaning of our world” (p. 131). The interpretive, hermeneutical nature of this method is seen in its unfaltering focus on understanding, explaining, and making meaning of the phenomenon.

For example, Philo Hove (1999) used interpretive phenomenology to examine the experience of wonder occurring during mindfulness retreats. In his dissertation, the researcher explored his own experiences, as well as materials from interviews, stories, poetry, and other narratives. The research includes the development of phenomenological narratives and hermeneutical inquiry. Early in the dissertation, Hove prepared the reader for the careful, thought-filled work of interpretive phenomenology:

If the pace of my inquiry is (deliberately) slow it is because it is precisely the haste of our lives which passes over, subdues, forecloses the transparent *punctum* of wonder.... When we stop, linger, observe and consider, a new quality emerges in these moments, an interest and surprising urgency to things as they are, and as they change. (pp. 7-8)

True to his word, Hove moves slowly, introducing mindfulness retreats by presenting a discussion of modern life, picking up topics such as postmodernism, theory, materialism, nostalgia, and so on. He moves on to describe his own experience with a mindfulness retreat and wonder but remains deliberate, not wanting to “move too quickly or mean to explain too much” (p. 34). Turning his attention to wonder, Hove considers the presence, absence, and qualities of wonder in a variety of contexts, drawing particular attention to the language used within the text as well as by others.

Entering into the analysis of interviews and participants’ experiences of wonder during mindfulness retreats, Hove organizes the discussion around thematic reflections such as *Retreat From, Retreat Into, and Return to the “World.”* van Manen (2011) emphasized that in interpretive phenomenology, such themes are not generalizations, rather they are “the constellations that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the patterns and light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes” (para. 3).

Throughout the text, Hove’s awareness of intentionality is evident as he speaks directly to the reader, explaining his steps and purpose. Questions are posed as a method of inviting the reader to follow in Hove’s hermeneutic process. van Manen (2011) explained: “We can write notes and paragraphs on the basis of our reading and other research activities. Of course, composing these ‘linguistic transformations’ is not a mechanical procedure. Rather it is a creative, hermeneutic process” (para. 7). Through these efforts, Hove found: “The phenomenon of wonder is therefore not the discontinuity of experience, but of experience *as conceived*. It is in wonder, that we are urged to be fully who we are” (p. 78).

Melissa: Nice example. So, tell me about bracketing.

Katherine: Husserl (1936/1970) described bracketing as a three-level process through which one synthesizes and comes to understand the phenomenon of focus. This process begins with the perception of a phenomenon and then narrows to examine specific parts of the phenomenon and finally to a revelation of the universal and essential structure that constitutes the phenomenon. While this analysis occurs with all forms of phenomena, I will use an everyday example to illustrate the process. In the first level of bracketing, the phenomenon is “taken initially as it is given perceptually: as ‘normal,’ simply there, unbroken, existing in pure ontic certainty...[a] guideline for inquiring back into the multiplicities of manners of appearing and their intentional structures” (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 172). Walking through a park I approach a group of children in a grassy area. At first, I simply take note of the rapid movement, flashes of color, and laughter. I am simply perceiving the group as a group. During the second level of the process, the phenomenon is considered in terms of what is particular, most

important, and most general about its character (Husserl, p. 172). Looking more closely at the group, I zero in on a ball. The ball is black and white. It is being kicked by the children. I continue to notice the group but I now focus on one of its parts: the ball. In the final level of reflection, the inquirer strives for “synthesis of intersubjectivity ... through which all ego-subjects ... are oriented toward a common world and the things in it” (Husserl, p. 172). At this stage, I move beyond perception and articulate a relationship between the whole (the group) and the part (the ball). I now realize the children are playing soccer. Sokolowski (2000) explained: “What happens in this third stage is that the whole ... and its part are explicitly distinguished. A relation between them is distinctly registered.... We have moved from sensibility to intellection, from mere experiencing to an initial understanding” (p. 90).

Gadamer (1960/1994) summed up this process, stating that “we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole” (p. 291). This process highlights human rationality, the movement from experiencing to judging. In phenomenological terms, this process is called *constitution*, meaning to bring a phenomenon “to light, to articulate it” (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 92). It is understood that we cannot bring to light anything that does not present itself to us as we may be mistaken in our understandings. For example, we might determine a shirt to be brown as we pull it from our dark closet, only to realize that the shirt is red in the light of the room. While we were mistaken in the color of the shirt, its brown color in darkness is a quality of the shirt, a manifold of its identity.

Although constitution is a three-level process, it is also recursive. In my example, I perceived the children to be playing soccer. I now notice that children are wearing different clothes. Some have on shoes and others do not. Moving again through the third-level, I understand this to be an unorganized soccer game. Through constitution, I generate fractional understandings; however, these understandings combine to increase my intelligibility of the phenomenon.

Having grasped the concept of constitution, I can recognize that my understandings of the world are a product of my mental processes. Taking a step back from constituting meaning, I can examine the process of constitution. Reflecting on my example, I might wonder: Why did I categorize that group of people as children? What other ways might I have described them? What prior knowledge allowed me to recognize their game as unorganized? Is it possible that their game was organized? Through this sort of questioning, I have begun to examine my own awareness of the phenomenon. In phenomenological terms, I have begun *bracketing*, which is a way of consciously putting aside preconceived understandings of the phenomenon or “fundamental structures in order to allow more basic objectifying acts of consciousness to become visible in themselves” (Moran, 2000, p. 149).

Although we know the world to exist, in *bracketing* we examine how the world comes to be constituted through our consciousness. Bracketing requires one to distance oneself from the phenomenon of interest by holding the phenomenon outside of one’s understandings of it. In this way, Ricoeur (1981/2002) suggested, “we interrupt lived experience in order to signify it” (p. 590). Husserl offered an example to help clarify this action. Consider a personal, deeply held conviction. Without surrendering this conviction, bracketing asks us to examine the conviction from a place of interest and uncertainty. Can you imagine a person for whom this conviction would not ring true? Can you imagine someone approaching this conviction for the first time uncertain of its value? From that place, bracketing begins. We view the belief, analyze its character, follow its possible coherencies. We examine, in pure reflection, what occurs as we reach insight. By examining our convictions this way, we consider the *what* and *how* of our conscious processes.

We can similarly hold all phenomena, all of nature, outside of our understandings of them. At the same time, suspending phenomena “is not to deny them [their existence] and even less to deny the link which binds us to the physical, social, and cultural world. It is on the

contrary to *see* this link, to become conscious of it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 49). After bracketing we are left with phenomena as experienced; “phenomena which are grasped by reflection as they are absolutely in themselves” (Husserl, 1917/2002, p. 130). This reflection, Husserl indicated, is now “pure and exclusive” (p. 130). Through bracketing, anything, any “persons, personal communities, social forms and formations, poetic and plastic formations, every kind of cultural work - all become in this way headings for phenomenological investigations” (Husserl, 1917/2002, p. 131). However, it would not be, for example, a phenomenological study of religion but a phenomenological study of the human experience of religion. Continuing this example, Moran (2002) explained that through bracketing “the focus is on the manner in which the sacred is experienced by the religious practitioner—or indeed as denied by the atheist—rather than on the attempt to ascertain if there really is or is not a domain of the sacred as it were ‘behind’ the belief” (p. 6). No matter the phenomenon of interest, phenomenological inquiry examines the human awareness *of* the phenomenon. After bracketing, “consciousness and what it is conscious of” is our field for pure reflection (Husserl, 1917/2002, p. 131).

While Husserl used the term *bracketing* to label this process, many since have likened the process to quotations. In writing, an author uses quotation marks to separate her own ideas and words from everyone else’s. Similarly, bracketing serves as “a series of methodological attempts to neutralize” (Moran, 2002, p.15) our own knowledge, experiences, and biases of a phenomenon. As van Manen (1990) has indicated: “the problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much” (p. 46). Through this process, it is hoped that we can now “look *at* what we normally look *through*” (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 50).

Bracketing is an iterative process that requires awareness of one’s preconceptions and significant contemplation. To “be guided by the things themselves is obviously not a matter of a single, ‘conscientious’ decision, but is ‘the first, last, and constant task’” (Gadamer, 1960/1994, pp. 266-267). Bracketing is meant to allow the phenomenon to reveal itself. Ultimately, phenomenological inquiry is difficult work. “It demands toilsome concentration on the data” (Husserl, 1913/1962, p. 259). Yet, Husserl (1917/2002) reminded his readers:

Just as pure geometry is not bound to shapes observed in actual experience but instead inquires into possible shapes and their possible transformations ... pure phenomenology proposes to investigate *the realm of pure consciousness and its phenomena* not as de facto existents but as pure possibilities with their pure laws. (p. 132)

This troublesome, penetrating work occurs in the returning again and again to the bracketed phenomenon, one moves through one’s layers of preconception, as though peeling through an onion, until understanding becomes refined. In more contemporary language, van Manen (1990) has described bracketing as “a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience” (p. 77).

Melissa: That was very interesting. So bracketing, contrary to how it sounds, is more than just suspending judgment. But since you said you wanted to do a post-intentional study, this third way you have mentioned a few times, there has to be something these two approaches aren’t allowing you to do?

Katherine: For those of us working in today’s world of qualitative inquiries, *bracketing* may sound familiar, even conventional, but Husserl’s developments were a significant departure from the philosophical and scientific inquiries of his time. He believed that all knowledge, whether oriented towards the humanities or the sciences, were affected by preconceptions and required bracketing in order to eliminate that effect. Further, Husserl

(1936/1970) called for a withholding of “all objective theoretical interests [and] any critical position-taking which is interested in their truth or falsity” (p. 135). Vagle (2011b) drew on the spirit of Husserl’s departure from accepted research traditions in his desire “to accomplish this sort of disruptive, radical work” (p. 11).

In an attempt to reimagine phenomenological research away from its descriptive-interpretive split, Vagle (2011a, 2011b, 2014) developed post-intentional phenomenology. This was not an attempt to bridge or reconnect the two emphases but to conceive of phenomenology as a human science research method in an entirely new way. Rather than mirroring “into a circular debate only important to those inside the game” (Vagle, 2011a, p. 6), Vagle strove to combine what was useful from both sides with elements from other, complementary philosophies. Vagle (2011a, p. 6) explained:

For me, post-structural conceptions of how knowing and understanding are fleeting, momentary, tentative, and dangerous opens up phenomenology more—it draws out phenomenology not only as a philosophy of lived experience, but also as a philosophy capable of being used toward political ends.

While bringing phenomenological research methods to contemporary ways of thinking, Vagle also strove to sustain phenomenology’s philosophical roots. By connecting phenomenology with other theories, researchers can seek understandings “that neither [phenomenology nor post-theories] can accomplish in the same ways on their own” (Vagle, 2011a, p. 11).

Melissa: So how does this blending affect the conceptualization of intentionality?

Katherine: Good question. In evaluating phenomenological research approaches, Vagle critiqued researchers who disregarded intentionality, focusing on the lived experience rather than the experience *of*. In addition to emphasizing the importance of examining intentionalities, post-intentional phenomenology also requires researchers to consider how intentionality is entwined in the research process. As an intentional relationship exists between all researchers and the phenomena they investigate, “dynamic intentional relationships ... tie participants, the researcher, the produced text and their positionality together” (Vagle, 2010, p. 399). For Vagle (2014) intentionality is

constantly being constructed, deconstructed, blurred, and disrupted.... [It] is running all over the place, all the time—at times with clarity, but most often in the gnarliness of life.... So, when I “post” intentionality I am saying that intentionalities cannot be traced. One cannot start with the stable subject and try to follow that subject’s intending toward and with the world. That very subject is both constructed and constructing, not dissolved. (p. 113)

Intentionalities, as phenomena themselves, remain complex, partial, and indefinite. For these reasons, a researcher cannot simply state the route from subject through *consciousness of* to phenomenon. This conceptualization allows researchers to discuss the situated meanings of intentionality (or lived experience) as separate from the essence of a phenomenon as well as how power and other social dynamics infiltrate the world as lived. For example, going back to the intentional relationship I have with my mother-in-law, I am not seeking to reveal “the actual events as they occurred,” or the essence of the phenomenon as in descriptive phenomenology, nor am I seeking to bring into visibility the constellations or themes that express the phenomenon as a complex lived experience as in interpretive phenomenology. Rather, a post-intentional approach would seek both to reveal the variety of experiences I have had with my mother-in-law while simultaneously disrupting the conventions, power structures, and other taken-for-granted notions that are brought forth in these rememberings and continuously

deferring any final interpretation of this phenomenon. In this way the focus is not primarily on the bringing-into-visibility of a phenomenon but is one that seeks to critically demonstrate how all phenomena are the effects of interpretive processes and are therefore open to re-interpretation.

Melissa: How about bracketing? Do post-intentional phenomenologists bracket?

Katherine: Post-intentional phenomenologists prefer to *bridle*. They have adopted Karin Dahlberg's (2006) concept of "bridling." Bridling includes the procedures covered by bracketing but extends these beyond the focus on one's preconceptions (Dahlberg, 2006). "As researchers ... [we are] immensely involved in the explication of meaning. Bridling then means to scrutinize the involvement with, this embodiment of, the investigated phenomenon and its meaning(s)" (p. 16). Dahlberg et al. (2008) add that bridling also "systematically and carefully scrutinize[s] the road to the decision of understanding" (p. 130). These researchers believe that phenomena are intimately connected to other phenomena, as well as to the researchers themselves. Researchers must take time to detangle themselves from their intentionalities with the phenomenon and the research processes, probing their own understandings and everyday interactions. Dahlberg et al. (2008) wrote that "the open bridling attitude should be practiced with such tenderness and sensitivity that the phenomenon is allowed to keep its indefiniteness as much and for as long as possible" (p. 134). So, bridling is the process through which post-intentional phenomenologists examine their own intentionalities with the phenomenon, as well as the intentional relationships introduced through the process of conducting research. Post-intentional phenomenology requires researchers to actively engage in bridling throughout the research process in order to acknowledge preconceptions, assumptions, biases, and prejudices, as well as their impact on the research process, data analysis, and interpretations.

Melissa: Well, I can see now why you would be interested in using a post-intentional approach. How do you think your study will be carried out?

Katherine: For my doctoral research (Soule, 2013<sup>3</sup>), I want to use post-intentional phenomenology to examine the interconnected meanings that come into being as mothers practice attachment parenting. If I could recruit four or five mothers, I would interview them each at least 3 times. Following phenomenological interviewing, the interview questions would try to keep the attention focused on participants' lived-experiences and meaning-making. That means participants will be invited to share and reflect openly on their personal experiences and understandings in order to explore the interconnected meanings that come into being as a mother practices attachment parenting.

I will probe to seek out distinctions, explore how participants' experiences are different from my own or from other participants' experiences. The purpose of seeking out these distinctions is to more fully explore the phenomenon, to challenge my own biases and assumptions, and to ensure data quality, thereby increasing the credibility of the research findings. For example, if participants focus on positive aspects of an experience, for example breastfeeding, I would want to ask whether they have experienced breastfeeding in other ways too. Throughout the research processes, I will continuously contemplate the interconnected meanings that come into being as mothers practice attachment parenting. Each interview will inform future interviews and participants can be sought out during analysis as well to help me examine places of agreement, divergence, and ambiguity.

Recognizing that the phenomenon of attachment parenting is intimately connected to other phenomena, as well as to my own experiences, I will take the time to detangle myself from my intentionalities with the phenomenon and the research process. I expect to write bridling statements and conduct bridling interviews (cf. Dahlberg et al., 2008; Vagle, 2009)

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<sup>3</sup> Katherine Soule has successfully defended her dissertation (see Soule, 2013) but so as not to break the flow of the conversation, recreates it here as a tentative design rather than one that has been completed.

whenever I feel unsettled, uncomfortable (or too comfortable) with an aspect of the study. Post-intentional phenomenology seeks to capture the complexity and richness of a phenomenon within the varied, and often contradictory, discourses that surround the topic.

By considering all facets of mothers' experiences, including the embodiment of carrying a fetus, giving birth, and the connection or disconnection between attachment parenting and normative parenting discourses, I hope to capture this complexity. I will probably draw on Vagle's (2014) concept of *tentative manifestations* of the phenomenon. The deliberate phrasing of the term *tentative manifestations* draws attention to efforts to lessen the researcher's authoritative voice and situate phenomenological work as contextual, partial, and incomplete. Similarly, attention will be given to the socio-cultural contexts in which these mothers' parenting experiences occur as well as the deeply personal nature of these experiences.

Melissa: It sounds like you have given this much thought and that you have a pretty good idea of why you want to use post-intentional phenomenology. Thank you for helping me better understand these distinctions. I look forward to supporting you through the process of completing your study.

Katherine: Well I am still learning, as we always are, and what I explained here is only a snapshot of this philosophy and the many ways researchers have drawn on them in their work. I always encourage everyone I can to read widely and from many sources, just as I did that summer long ago.

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